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ABSTRACT

Unlike units and themes in the early childhood and primary curriculum, projects are defined as children's in-depth investigations of various topics--ideally, topics worthy of the children's time and energy. As increasing numbers of teachers and school districts incorporate project work into their curriculum, questions have been raised about what to consider when selecting project topics. This Digest addresses the main issues and suggests a list of topic selection criteria. General factors to consider in selecting topics include: (1) characteristics of the particular group of children; (2) the geographic context of the school; (3) the school's wider cultural community; (4) the availability of relevant local resources; (5) the topic's potential contribution to later learning; and (6) the teacher's own knowledge of the topic. Using children's interests as a starting point in topic selection may lead to choosing appropriate topics, but this approach also presents several potential pitfalls. There are also problems associated with choosing exotic or fanciful topics. A topic is appropriate if: (1) it is directly observable in the children's own environments; (2) it is within most children's experiences; (3) first-hand direct investigation is feasible and not potentially dangerous; (4) local resources (field sites and experts) are favorable and readily accessible; (5) it has good potential for representation in a variety of media; (6) parental participation and contributions are likely, and parents can become involved; (7) it is sensitive to the local culture as well as culturally appropriate in general; (8) it is potentially interesting to many of the children, or represents an interest that adults consider worthy of developing in children; (9) it is related to curriculum goals and standards of the school or district; (10) it provides ample opportunity to apply basic skills; and (11) it is optimally specific--not too narrow and not too broad. (LPP)

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Issues in Selecting Topics for Projects

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Unlike units and themes in the early childhood and primary curriculum, projects are defined as children's in-depth investigations of various topics—ideally, topics worthy of the children's time and energy. Usually the project is the work of a whole class, typically working in small groups on subtopics related to the overall one selected. As increasing numbers of teachers and school districts incorporate project work into their curriculum, questions have been raised about what to consider when selecting project topics. In this Digest, we address the main issues and suggest a list of topic selection criteria.

The Project Approach

Project work—and thus the choice of topics—can help prepare students for participation in a democratic society. In the service of democratic goals, choosing good topics for investigation can deepen children's understanding and knowledge of others' contributions to their well-being. Furthermore, during project work, many processes and skills useful for participation in a democracy are applied: resolving conflicts, sharing responsibility for carrying out plans, making suggestions to one another, and so forth.

The Project Approach can be useful with groups of children from diverse ability and cultural backgrounds because topics can be chosen from the children's immediate environment. A sense of community is easier to develop when all are able to discuss a project topic with some confidence (Greenwald & Hand, 1997; Gutwirth, 1997).

As the children get to know each other, they can more readily appreciate the fact that others have different experiences and interests. However, we suggest a distinction between a child's *culture* and a child's *heritage* in the choice of topics. A child's culture refers to his or her current day-to-day experiences and environment; the child's heritage refers to historic and ancestral origins of their families. In the early years, project topics are best taken from the children's culture rather than heritage, though aspects of the latter can and should be introduced to the children in other parts of the curriculum.

General factors to consider in selecting topics include (1) characteristics of the particular group of children, (2) the geographic context of the school, (3) the school's wider cultural community, (4) the availability of relevant local resources, (5) the topic's potential contribution to later learning, and (6) the teacher's own knowledge of the topic. More specific criteria include the topic's potential interest to the children and its relationship to their particular daily lives. Occasionally, a teacher is responsible for children whose personal situations are such that a topic ordinarily appropriate would not be selected. For example, many teachers of young children have guided them through detailed study of the local hospital. However, it might be the case that a child has had a very recent traumatic experience or a frightening hospitalization experience. In such a situation, the study of that topic might best be postponed until a later time.

Children's Interests as a Guide to Topic Selection

Using children's interests as a starting point in topic selection may lead to choosing appropriate topics, but this approach also presents several potential pitfalls. First, what does it mean to say that an individual or group of children is "interested" in a topic? Interests can be of relatively low educational value; Wilson (1971) gives the example of a young boy in his class whose main "interest" for some time was how to pull off the legs of a fly! Children's interests may actually represent passing thoughts, fleeting concerns, phobias, obsessions, or fascination with media-related characters.

Second, just because children express interest in a given topic does not mean that their interest deserves to be strengthened by the serious attention of the teacher. For example, the publicity given to movies may provoke children's interest in a certain topic. Several teachers we know responded to young children's spontaneous discussions of the Titanic tragedy that had been stimulated by the movie. Although the children's interest in the topic was clear, first-hand investigations of the topic were obviously not possible. Teachers can deal with this interest in ways that do not include expending the time and energy necessary to develop a project around it. For example, children can discuss their reactions to the movie, can engage in spontaneous dramatic play involving rescue operations or icebergs, draw and paint them, and read books about them during discussions in which the teacher helps them interpret the facts and events. In other words, we suggest making a distinction between providing opportunity for child-initiated spontaneous activity about a topic and investing in a long-range effort focused on it.

Third, one of the responsibilities of adults is to help children to develop new intellectual interests. Children's awareness of their teacher's real and deep interest in a topic worthy of their investigation, for example, can stimulate their own interest in the topic as well.

Fourth, we suggest that a topic should reflect our commitment to taking children and their intellectual powers seriously, and to treating children as serious investigators. It is easy to underestimate the satisfaction and meaning children gain from the hard work of close observation of nearby phenomena.

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Choosing Exotic or Fanciful Topics

Sometimes adults promote exotic topics for projects in the hope of motivating children, especially those who often seem reluctant to join in the work. For example, projects revolving around the rain forest undertaken in northern Illinois schools may entice some youngsters into enthusiastic participation, and studies of medieval castles undertaken in tropical Australian schools can arouse some children's animated participation.

Our experience indicates that young children can be equally intrigued, however, by close observation of their own environments, whether they are a prairie, a cornfield, the seashore, a desert, an urban market, or a nearby bike shop. Children do not have to be fascinated, spellbound, enchanted, or bewitched by a topic. A main aim of project work in the early years is to strengthen children's dispositions to be interested, absorbed, and involved in in-depth observation, investigation, and representation of some worthwhile phenomena in their own environments.

If a project topic is exotic, it is by definition too remote for the children to be able to contribute the kind of predictions, hypotheses, and questions that are at the core of investigation, and thus their dependence on the teacher and secondary sources will be increased. Ideally, project work is the part of the curriculum in which children are encouraged to take initiative, to influence the direction of their own work, and to accept responsibility for what is accomplished.

Topics selected to amuse or entertain children (e.g., mermaids, teddy bears, or the circus) are more *fanciful* than they are encouraging to development of children's imagination. In good project work, by contrast, children have ample opportunity to use and strengthen their imaginative powers. For example, they can share and represent their own memories related to the topic, predict what they will find before going on a field trip, or speculate about the answers to questions to be asked in an interview of a local expert.

Accountability Concerns

Optimal Use of School Time. Concern for optimal use of school time includes assessing whether the topic is likely to be studied closely outside of the school. An in-depth investigation of local insects and plants is unlikely to be undertaken by many individual families at home. However, many families as well as television programs provide extensive information about holidays, legends, and local customs.

Curriculum Requirements. Most official curriculum guides are cast in such broad terms that it is possible to select good project topics from among the lists of subjects mandated for coverage. Choosing topics that have a clear link to the official state or local curriculum guides is a good idea; it helps reassure parents that their children's education conforms to official guidelines.

Criteria for Choosing Projects

Based on the issues raised above, we offer a tentative set of criteria for topic selection as follows. A topic is appropriate if:

- it is directly observable in the children's own environments (real world);
- it is within most children's experiences;
- first-hand direct investigation is feasible and not potentially dangerous;
- local resources (field sites and experts) are favorable and readily accessible;
- it has good potential for representation in a variety of media (e.g., role play, construction, writing, multi-dimensional, graphic organizers);
- parental participation and contributions are likely, and parents can become involved;
- it is sensitive to the local culture as well as culturally appropriate in general;
- it is potentially interesting to many of the children, or represents an interest that adults consider worthy of developing in children;
- it is related to curriculum goals and standards of the school or district;
- it provides ample opportunity to apply basic skills (depending on the age of the children); and
- it is *optimally* specific—not too narrow and not too broad (e.g., a study of the teacher's own dog or "buttons" at one end, and the topic of "music" or "the seasons" at the other).

Conclusion

Teachers have the ultimate responsibility for selecting the topics for projects undertaken by their pupils. But the number of possible topics for projects is so large that it is a good idea to have some bases for deciding which are appropriate to the children's intellectual development. The best project topics are those that enable children to strengthen their natural dispositions to be interested, absorbed, and involved in in-depth observation and investigation, and to represent that learning in a wide variety of ways in their classrooms.

For More Information

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